

VZCZCXRO0209
PP RUEHBC RUEHBI RUEHCI RUEHDBU RUEHDE RUEHDH RUEHKUK RUEHLH RUEHPW
RUEHROV
DE RUEHKA #0237/01 0640713
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 050713Z MAR 09
FM AMEMBASSY DHAKA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 8410
INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUCNISL/ISLAMIC COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 2006
RUEHGO/AMEMBASSY RANGOON PRIORITY 2788
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI PRIORITY
RHHJJPI/PACOM IDHS HONOLULU HI PRIORITY
RHHMUNS/COMSOPAC HONOLULU HI PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 DHAKA 000237

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/04/2019
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [PINS](#) [KDEM](#) [PTER](#) [ASEC](#) [BG](#)
SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR PRESSES KHALEDA ZIA ON NEED FOR
NATIONAL UNITY IN AFTERMATH OF BDR MUTINY

REF: A. DHAKA 222
[1](#)B. DHAKA 218
[1](#)C. DHAKA 213
[1](#)D. DHAKA 210
[1](#)E. DHAKA 207
[1](#)F. DHAKA 204

Classified By: Ambassador James Moriarty, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY
=====

[1](#)1. (C) The Ambassador encouraged Leader of the Opposition Khaleda Zia to continue to reach out to the Government in the wake of the Bangladesh Rifles Mutiny. For her part, Zia complained that the Government repeatedly refused to provide space to the opposition, and she threatened to "go to the people" if this continued. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party leader was critical of the GOB's response to the mutiny and saw a sinister motive behind the actions of its negotiators. Early hopes that the crisis would cause the political parties to put aside their differences seem less likely than ever. For the sake of Bangladesh's democracy, however, we need to continue to look for ways to encourage a more pluralistic political culture.

Opposition's Role in Responding to BDR Crisis
=====

[1](#)2. (C) The Ambassador met with Leader of the Opposition and Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) Chairperson Khaleda Zia March 4 to stress the importance of national unity as Bangladesh responds to the tragic February 25 - 26 Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) Mutiny. (reftels) Zia Advisors Ambassador Reaz Rahman, Ambassador Shamsher Mobin Chowdhury, Major General (ret'd) Fazle Elahi Akbar and Pol/Econ Counselor (notetaker) also participated in the ninety minute meeting.

[1](#)3. (C) The Ambassador conveyed the USG's condolences for the tragic loss of life and explained our efforts to support the democratic process throughout the crisis. He acknowledged this had been a particularly difficult time for the country as it was trying to consolidate its democracy. The Ambassador expressed appreciation for Zia's conciliatory statement during the mutiny in which she offered to cooperate with the GOB. The Ambassador also welcomed Zia's decision to return to Parliament.

Opposition Complains About Lack of Space
=====

[1](#)4. (C) Zia complained that it had been difficult for the Opposition to express its sentiments in Parliament. She said

her party members had not been allowed to speak and noted that the government-owned Bangladesh Television had refused to broadcast her remarks during the debate on a condolence motion. Zia asked rhetorically how she could help the GOB when the Prime Minister refused to reach out to her. Zia said that on the day of the mutiny she had expected to receive a call from the Prime Minister but one had never come. Zia dismissed GOB claims that she had been out of contact on February 25 and 26, noting that she had been in constant communication with her party supporters.

15. (C) Zia said she was uncertain what was happening, since the government had not kept the Opposition informed of its actions. Zia termed the GOB inquiry commission unacceptable, since it only included government officials and no Opposition members. Rahman noted the commission was filled with bureaucrats who would be inclined to go along with whatever the GOB wanted. He stressed the need for a truly independent inquiry that would take a holistic view of the mutiny -- including scrutiny of the GOB's actions before and during the crisis. He suggested that a Parliamentary Committee could play this role. Rahman was also critical of the decision to establish parallel military and civilian inquiries.

16. (C) Zia argued the Awami League did not want democracy and accused the ruling party of killing her supporters. She said the GOB refused to provide any space to the opposition. Meanwhile, Zia said she was continuing efforts to reform the party. She told the Ambassador a BNP Council meeting would take place in July or August, at which time the Standing Committee would be restructured. She said the BNP would put

DHAKA 00000237 002 OF 004

forward very good candidates in the upcoming Parliamentary by-elections. Zia refused to say who would be nominated, noting only that she had strong local and central candidates to choose from. She repeated her complaints that the Election Commission was not neutral. Zia predicted the Party would have no alternative but to launch a popular protest movement if the by-elections were not free and fair. Zia asked the USG to send a message to the Government on the need to ensure fair elections.

BNP Calls for Impartial Inquiry...

17. (C) Rahman told the Ambassador the BNP joined in the universal condemnation of the mutiny but had questions about the GOB's reaction. He said there should be a review of the timing of the GOB response, the decision to negotiate, and the issue of granting a general amnesty. He added that the inquiry needed to look into the root causes of the mutiny, which he termed a "fight over the spoils" of corruption within the BDR. Finally, there had to be an investigation into the many theories regarding outside involvement by domestic and foreign groups. Rahman and Chowdhury noted that Zia had issued a very forthcoming statement at the beginning of the crisis. They complained that not only had the GOB ignored the BNP's offer to cooperate but said officials were now blaming opposition leaders for the mutiny.

18. (C) The Ambassador acknowledged the need for a thorough inquiry into the mutiny, including the need to establish a timeline of events to determine when the officers were killed and when the army was in place to launch a rescue operation. The Ambassador said the USG had no information regarding outside support for the mutiny, but we were keeping an open mind. He cautioned against a rush to judgment before there was any available evidence.

...And Criticizes GOB Response

19. (C) Zia criticized the GOB's decision to grant an

amnesty, particularly while the fate of the BDR Director General and other officers was unknown. She questioned the Prime Minister's decision to name a relatively junior member of her Cabinet, Local Government State Minister Nanak, as the lead negotiator. Zia noted the presence of retired senior officers within the ruling alliance, including former Army Chief H.M. Ershad, Air Vice Marshal AK Khandaker, and Major General Abdus Salam, and said any of these would have been a better choice than Nanak. Zia and her colleagues argued that many lives could have been saved had the Army been given permission to intervene immediately.

¶10. (C) At Zia's request, Ambassador Chowdhury recounted the example of former President Ziaur Rahman's response to a Bangladesh Air Force mutiny in October 1977. The mutiny had taken place during the hijacking of a Japan Airlines airplane and the ensuing hostage crisis involving senior Bangladeshi and Japanese officials. Despite the risks, Ziaur Rahman ordered a military operation which succeeded in ending the mutiny within minutes with minimal additional loss of life. Similarly, Zia noted that she had not hesitated to use force to quash a mutiny by the Ansars in December 1994. Zia and her colleagues noted the futility of negotiating with hostage takers. They also questioned the reported ties between the GOB negotiators and the mutineers. Zia accused GOB officials of providing shelter to the leaders of the mutiny.

¶11. (C) Chowdhury asked how such a massive intelligence failure could take place. The Ambassador noted it was premature to determine whether there had been any external involvement or whether this had simply been an internal BDR problem. Only when the nature of the incident was clear would it be possible to assign responsibility for the failure to anticipate the rebellion. Chowdhury speculated that members of the BDR's internal security arm could have been involved. He noted inconsistencies in the information disseminated by the GOB in the aftermath of the crisis, for example the timing of the arrest of the alleged ringleaders. The Ambassador cautioned that initial information during a crisis is often incomplete and inconsistencies did not necessarily imply an attempt to hide the truth.

Possible Conspiracy

DHAKA 00000237 003 OF 004

=====

¶12. (C) Zia suggested there might be a link between elements of the ruling coalition and the conspiracy. She noted that extreme left parties had infiltrated the Army in the early 1970s. This had culminated in November 1975 during the "sepoy rebellion" led by Abu Taher. Then-Army Chief Ziaur Rahman had crushed the rebellion and the leaders had been executed. One of Taher's brothers was now a ruling party Member of Parliament who had been seen on the BDR compound during the mutiny. Other Taher associates were also still active. Zia also suggested that the Home Minister should take responsibility for this failure and resign.

¶13. (C) Akbar said the authors of the mutiny wanted to remove the Army from the BDR in order to weaken Bangladesh's defenses. He said every Bangladesh war plan relies upon the BDR to supplement the army. This depends on the presence of army officers, without whom the BDR would not be combat worthy. Akbar said after the January 11, 2007 State of Emergency, the Awami League wanted to weaken the Army. Moreover, because of her family history (her father was assassinated by army officers) Sheikh Hasina had no love for the army. He said that the plotters had not intended to provoke such a massive loss of life. Instead, the plan had been to simply hold the BDR Director General hostage and then negotiate the Army out of the BDR. The situation had gotten out of control once shots were fired. Akbar questioned the relationship between the mutiny leaders and GOB officials, saying that there were phone records of longstanding contacts between the two groups in the run-up to the mutiny.

Dissatisfaction Within Army
=====

¶14. (C) Zia blamed the Awami League's introduction of a one-party system in 1974 for beginning the process of politicization of the army. At that time, the three service chiefs were compelled to join the ruling party. She complained that politicization now extended to the civil service. Zia questioned how much longer she could continue to support the government before she had to "go to the people." Rahman noted the recent decision to file criminal charges against the former Information Secretary for a poem he had written that was alleged to be disrespectful to Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Zia said the GOB had filed false cases against her supporters, adding that the police were powerless and at the mercy of politicians. She feared the Awami League would destroy all the country's institutions: the Election Commission had been suborned, and the Anti-Corruption Commission rendered ineffective. She said the GOB was full of corrupt officials, noting that Hasina Advisers H.T. Imam, Tawfique-e-Elahi Chowdhury, Mashiur Rahman, and Cabinet Members Nanak and Abul Hossain were known to be corrupt.

¶15. (C) Akbar said that the inner feelings of the Army were still unsettled, particularly over the treatment of family members of the officers who had been killed. He alleged that a number of wives and daughters of slain officers had been raped. Akbar said he was in contact with a number of officers and repeatedly urged them not to allow the Army's chain of command to break down. The only way to assuage the army was to ensure an impartial investigation free from political interference; the Army had been on the verge of mutiny when the Prime Minister addressed Officers March 1. According to Akbar an audiotape of Hasina's meeting with the officers was now in circulation and revealed the depth of emotion.

Concerns about Zia's Security
=====

¶16. (C) In this context, Akbar said, he was worried about Khaleda Zia's security. He feared Zia could be the "next target" of those behind the BDR mutiny. Akbar noted the BNP had requested additional security but had not received any response to their request. He believed Zia's security detail was totally inadequate and asked that she be provided with at least an armored vehicle and a ten person Special Security Force detail. Akbar said the consequences of any attempt against the Leader of the Opposition would be dire. There was a leadership vacuum at the top of the Army, and many in the Army saw Khaleda Zia as the only natural leader left in the country.

DHAKA 00000237 004 OF 004

Not Too Late
=====

¶17. (C) We asked whether there was an opportunity for the ruling party and opposition to work together in Parliament on the future of the BDR, for example through the Standing Committee on Home Affairs. The Ambassador also noted the important role the Parliament could play in strengthening civilian control of the military, which had been tested during this crisis. While the anger within the army appeared to be dissipating, the crisis had exposed fault lines between the civilian government and junior and mid rank army officers.

¶18. (C) Zia said it was not too late for the Opposition and Government to find a way to work together but admitted she was pessimistic about the prospects for cooperation. Chowdhury welcomed initiatives by the USG, including the National Democratic Institute's programs, to foster opportunities for cooperation across the aisle. It was

important, however, that the Opposition be treated with due respect. Chowdhury complained that the recent visit by the Indian Speaker of Parliament (for a USAID-sponsored training for new MPS) had been a missed opportunity, since the visitor had not bothered to seek a meeting with the Leader of the Opposition. Rahman stressed the importance of Parliament as a focal point for the future. The Opposition needed a "voice, space, and time" and the opportunity to help set the agenda. Zia said the GOB was mean-spirited, not even allowing her to lay a wreath during the funeral for the slain Army Officers.

Comment
=====

119. (C) In the initial stage of the crisis, there was hope that this tragic event would provide an opportunity for the political parties to put aside their differences and unite on an issue of vital interest. As time passes, it is becoming clear that this opportunity is being squandered. Both sides are to blame for the return to politics as usual. We will continue to look for opportunities to encourage the politicians to make a break from the past. While it will not be easy, we continue to believe that working with the ruling party and opposition in Parliament provides the best hope for a change from the politics of confrontation.

MORIARTY